
CALL INTERACTIVE

Electronic Democracy

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In June the Liberal Party in Nova Scotia, Canada, used a provincewide telephone vote to choose a new leader. Despite a computer failure that delayed the vote by two weeks, four times as many people participated in the 1992 vote as in the previous convention when traditional voting methods were used, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. This is a dramatic illustration of the way electronic technology can bring people back into the political process. Properly used, electronic technology can help transform political disaffection into political participation.

Like other technologies, modern interactive communications technology offers both promise and peril. The printing press can be used for propaganda or for education; the atom for peaceful energy or nuclear warfare; interactive communications technology for demagoguery or democracy. Also, like other technologies, interactive communications technology contains its own imperative; it will be used, the question is how.

Growing Political Disaffection

The election of 1988 may come to be seen as a landmark in American politics. The voter turnout was barely above 50 percent, the lowest since 1924, when Calvin Coolidge beat John W. Davis. That low turnout underscored the average American voter's disaffection from the electoral process. Polls conducted during and after the campaign revealed that citizens were unhappy with their electoral choices and dismayed by the negative tone of the campaign. They believed they had been manipulated by mass marketing rather than informed. The culture of massmarketing was substituted for that of responsible citizenship.

In daily papers and on nightly newscasts in 1988, stories regularly dealt with strategic gossip, rather than substance—what the "handlers" were doing with their candidate, rather than what the candidate thought. Sometimes the campaign seemed more like a boxing match than an exercise in democracy, and the time between rounds more important than the actual fight. What were the pollsters and handlers doing to prepare their man for the next round? How would the "spin doctors" explain an unflattering photograph, a misstatement, or the inadequate answer to a probing question? The candidates and their advisors seemed to have accepted the idea that "image is everything."

Other factors in 1988 also contributed to voters' dismay. The cost of

An example of a new technology that permits voter feedback is Omaha's "Call Interactive," which instantly tallies and graphs viewers' opinions, in this instance, for Cable News Network.

campaigns was clearly getting out of hand. The two main candidates spent an estimated $500 million, half on television, with television ads accounting for the greatest portion of that half. Although some television campaign ads are informative, they depend, for much of their effectiveness, on image—constructing a positive image for the candidate who is advertising and a negative image of his opponent. Journalistic coverage of the 1988 campaign also continued to show the reliance of candidates on polls to determine the course of their campaigns, and the reliance of the press on polls to determine the pulse of the campaign. The heavy reliance of candidates on polls suggests that their opinions and answers to questions depend upon the direction of the prevailing breeze, rather than on deeply held beliefs, well-thought-out ideas about issues, or justified uncertainty in the face of extremely complex problems.

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It is not only the questionable *use* of polls that accounts for citizens unease however. They know that their views are presumably encompassed in a poll that may be based on a sample of somewhere between 500 and 1,000 people. Regardless of the statistical reliability of the sample—which cannot be taken for granted—it is hard for anyone to believe that a nation of 250 million people can be boiled down to a sample of 500. Whatever the merits of polling, small sample sizes, capricious use, and use for strategy rather than substance further suggest to the citizen that individuals don't count. In addition, in 1988 the political process paid little heed to the positions of minorities and almost none to the complexities and subtleties of individual views.

Americans' widespread disaffection from the electoral process is not, however, simply a result of mean-spirited campaigns carried out as exercises in mass-marketing. The very growth of the population inevitably leads to greater and greater distance of the average individual citizen from his/her elected representative. James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers:

"In the next place, as each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens in the large than in the small republic, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried; and the suffrages of the people being more free, will be more likely to centre in men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive in established characters . . . By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representative too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects."

When Madison wrote those words, he might have been able to

see a generation or two ahead, but he undoubtedly would have been shocked by the population explosion that led to a nation of 250 million. It is possible that his confidence in the value of increased numbers of electors for each representative would have been shaken as he witnessed the greater and greater disaffection of the citizenry.

Ross Perot and the 1992 Campaign

In happy times, many citizens are glad to let their elected representatives go about their work without much dialogue between the representative and electors. But when the country is beset by the savings and loan debacle, check-writing scandals in the House of Representatives, recession, and an uncertain future, citizens are much less willing to be unheard and unseen. Ross Perot seemed to have understood this in 1992 when he entered the campaign as the champion of the individual citizen, saying that if he were elected President, he would convene the country in "electronic town meetings" on important issues. Perot's astounding popularity was based at least in part on his tapping a sympathetic chord in the American people. Citizens were not being treated as individuals, and they overwhelmingly felt that they had little or no access to a system that often seemed in stalemate or out of control. The "electronic town meeting" suggested that there was a way to leap over the political system and put people directly in touch with their leaders.

While he never developed the "electronic town meeting" format, Perot immediately went on to demonstrate what was possible, and Clinton and Bush shortly followed suit.

Television and radio talk shows allowed the candidates to respond directly to individual citizens without being interpreted or mediated by the press. Compared to 1988, the public saw far more of the candidates on *Larry King Live*, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Night Line*, *McNeil-Lehrer*, and many other shows than ever before. While not many citizens were able to talk directly with the candidates, it was seen that some citizens were able to do so. Talk show appearances had other practical values for the candidates as well; they minimized television expenditures and allowed the candidates to save money for other purposes later in the campaign. The idea of the electronic town meeting caught the public's fancy. The widespread use of talk shows began to illustrate that candidates could have a dialogue with the citizenry by the use of electronic techniques, in this case, broadcasting and the telephone.

In running his independent political campaign, Perot planted the seeds of electronic citizenship. Current technology is inadequate to allow electronic town halls to become immediate realities. Even in 1992, however, the technology is much further advanced than in 1988. When CBS used an 800 number during the presidential primaries to examine the public consciousness in *America On*

The Line, there were 24 million calling attempts, but only about 300,000 calls got through. Far fewer would have been able to get through in 1988, and many more will be able to get through in 1996.

In the next few years, electronic technology will allow some version of Perot's electronic town hall. The technology will be used. The question is how can electronic technology be used for democratic purposes and values in keeping with the virtues of republican democracy celebrated by James Madison.

Foreshadowing the Future

The 1992 presidential campaign has given several examples of the way electronic technology may be used to reach out to voters and involve them in an interactive format that goes beyond traditional broadcast television. The talk show is the simplest of these, and one that is novel in 1992 only because of its increased prevalence. In the typical talk show, a political candidate will be interviewed by a host and then field questions from a live audience or from people who call in their questions. The number of questioners is obviously limited by the length of the show, as well as the budget available to cover the cost of an 800 number. The most advanced 800 service is Call Interactive, a joint venture of AT&T and American Express Information Services. Using a digitized voice answering system, Call Interactive can handle 10,000 calls every 90 seconds. The cost of the service is based on the volume of calls. With a nominal set-up fee, 8,000 minutes of calls would cost approximately $2,000. Candidate Clinton used another version of the talk show format when he was connected via satellite to ten different American cities, where samples of voters gave their opinions and voiced their questions directly.

A more advanced example of the possibilities of interaction is provided by the Zenith cable television technology called Z-View. In this system, subscriber responses are conveyed immediately to the head-end by a variety of possible return paths: the telephone network, an upstream path on the cable, or an upstream radio signal from a home transmitter to the head-end via a satellite. For the radio path, Zenith-made converters, currently available on about 25 cable systems, contain small radio transmitters that communicate back to the head-end. The system can handle some 180 upstream messages per second, and converters keep transmitting until their signals are received, so all subscriber responses can be handled at the head-end within a few minutes, even if 30,000 converters are transmitting simultaneously.

With Z-View, another possible return path utilizes Automatic Number Identification (ANI). In this mode, a subscriber calls a telephone number that represents a particular choice, for example, a pay-per-view selection. There is no voice interaction. The ANI picks up two bits of subscriber information and transmits

them to the head-end computer: the telephone number called, representing a particular choice, and the subscriber's telephone number.

There are now about 11 million cable subscribers who are using one or another form of ANI. The ANI system could be adapted for a national service to allow viewers to respond to questions. For example, several telephone numbers could be used to denote different viewer responses. Multiple telephone numbers would slow the system down, but at least 100 calls per second could be handled. One major advantage of this is that no modifications or connections to cable converters are needed; subscribers simply use their telephones.

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The technology exemplified by Z-View is adaptable by special software programs to surveys of cable subscribers. Criteria for selecting survey participants are very flexible, and subscribers can be polled in about 20 seconds. If the results of polling a large audience are cross-tabulated with various demographic categories, it can be done at the rate of about one subscriber per minute.

What the Zenith technology foreshadows is clear. Within the next few years, certainly the decade, there will be widespread technology available that allows messages to reach people in their homes, and permits them to respond quickly and conveniently at low cost. Those responses will be able to be collected, totaled, and tabulated, with the results displayed on a television screen within a few minutes of the original question being asked.

The Dangers of Plebiscitary Democracy

The way will be open for Ross Perot's "electronic town halls" to become a fixture of our national scene. More easily than ever before, a politician could leap over normal governmental processes and take important questions directly to the public, raising all the dangers of national plebiscites. As potentially almost everyone would be able to participate, public decisions on questions of importance could be taken as mandates for political action. Even though it might not have any legal standing, surely an overwhelming national vote by this means on a question of importance would have compelling weight with any political leader. Tendencies toward plebiscitary democracy are already evident, and technological progress may accelerate them.

The use and misuse of citizen initiatives illustrate the dangers of plebiscites. In California (and at least 22 other states) the initiative gives people the right to place on the ballot legislation and amendments to the state's constitution and obtain a statewide vote. The idea behind the initiative was to allow people a means

of expressing their political will in the face of legislative inaction or the opposition of special interests. The problem is that in California the ballot has become so loaded with complex initiatives that it seems to discourage people from going to the polls rather than motivating them to express their judgment. Outcomes seem more often to depend upon the effectiveness of political advertising rather than on the carefully weighed choices of an educated citizenry. The apparent limitations and failures of the initiative process suggest the dangers inherent in the new electronic technology: manipulation may be substituted for education and advertising for careful information-gathering; debate and deliberation may be overridden by the adrenaline of an immediate reaction; and minority opinions and objections can be lost in the voice of the crowd.

Enhancing Democracy: Six Requirements

The failures of the initiative process, the problems of plebiscites, and the dangers of propaganda and demagoguery suggest the characteristics that are needed to define democratic uses of new interactive information technologies. Requirements for at least six important features must be taken into account: access, information, discussion, deliberation, choice, and action. Perhaps the most important requirement is access.

Access: The experience of the last few elections, the meteoric rise of Ross Perot, and the popularity of the talk show and call-in format in television and radio all show the hunger of citizens for access to their leaders and to the means for expressing their own opinions and judgments. Provision for access does not necessarily mean that citizens will take advantage of it; not all citizens take advantage of their voting rights. Only 50 percent of eligible voters participated in the 1988 presidential elections, and even fewer participate in primaries and most local elections. However, the importance of the availability of the vote cannot be exaggerated. Imagine the public's wrath if someone decided to begin restricting voting rights rather than extending them, as has been the historical trend since the founding of the Republic. A well designed national system of interactive information technology for consideration of important issues could be expected to be similarly treasured, but not necessarily universally used. It is this problem of access for a growing and diverse population, dispersed over a very large geographical area that makes a national system of interactive information technology civicly useful. If well designed, such a system can counter divisive trends and help bring the nation together.

Information and Education: A vital part of any deliberative discussion is the provision for relevant information. In the discussion of any issue, people enter the conversation with widely differing experience and information about the issue. Take the issue of healthcare. Many citizens understand that severe problems exist

in our present system of financing and distributing healthcare; many see that their own insurance costs are rising rapidly; others know that they are uninsured or underinsured; older people may worry about Medicare and Medicaid cutbacks. Surveys show, however, that relatively few citizens have a thorough understanding of the forces that drive medical costs and the alternatives for provision of care that have been tried in the United States and around the world. Any general public discussion of healthcare must find ways to allow more citizens to be thoroughly informed about the issues and problems. Otherwise, debate will be based upon opinion rather than fact, prejudice rather than knowledge. A system of interactive information technology need not itself contain the vital information. References could be made to other sources of information ranging from reference material in libraries to documentaries on television. In fact, the national media would naturally be expected to carry much of the relevant information in any national discussion of an issue.

Discussion: Information technology can stimulate discussion not only between citizens and their leaders, but among the citizens themselves. Although radio and television broadcasting has been a superb means for the dissemination of entertainment and culture, news, and sports, a broadcast is a transmission from a central source to an audience. Not only is there usually no feedback from the audience to the source, but the audience typically receives the broadcast in individual isolation. Broadcasting, as a technology, does not naturally stimulate discussion among the people who receive the broadcast.

Networked computers offer quite a different model. Whether by computer conference or electronic mail, networked computing encourages people to communicate with one another. The experience of highly networked communities, such as Carnegie Mellon University or the nationwide SeniorNet organization, shows that when people are connected together over a computer system, they tend to communicate more broadly and intensively than without the system. The evidence is very clear that computer conferencing tends to reduce isolation rather than increase it. In order to discuss civic issues, people need easy ways to enter such discussions. Anecdotes tell of the local barber shop as one place where citizens have naturally gathered to talk with each other. Electronic technology can be used to provide a modern day equivalent of the barber shop, connecting citizens with each other all across the nation and with their leaders.

Deliberation: Any interactive communication system must provide the means for deliberation, that is, the careful consideration of an issue and the likely consequences of decisions. For deliberation to occur, provision must be made for the presentation of various sides of a question and attention to different approaches to outcomes. The great issues of our

time—such as healthcare, the improvement of the educational system, the functioning of the economy, or political reform—are extremely complex and cannot be deliberately considered in any brief period of time. Work by the Public Agenda Foundation, over many years, has shown that even when issues are clarified, it usually takes at least six weeks, with a concentrated educational campaign, for people to deliberate about a problem and come to a reasoned judgment. In many matters, the time would be much longer, and it would not be unexpected if a year or even several years would have to be devoted to deliberative consideration before problems become clarified in the public's mind. The implication for a system of interactive information technology: whatever is done must be an ongoing process. There could be repeated uses of the system on a single topic, for example, a series of debates about healthcare lasting several months. The computer conference is an alternative model for such a deliberative system. In a computer conference, people have access to questions, facts, and opinions, and can take their time about when they are ready to give their own opinion. Input can be made at any time, and the ongoing output of the system can be studied until someone believes he or she has something to say.

Choices: Discussion and deliberation are sharpened when participants understand that choices among alternative courses of action must be made. The managers of an interactive system devoted to electronic democracy need to organize the process so that choices are the outcome. Responsible government is not merely a means of educating the citizenry, but it is also a process of making choices that shape the future of society. With some deliberative dialogues, the possible choices may be clear from the beginning—this might be the case if the issue were the deployment of limited resources among various desirable ends. How should limited resources be allocated to healthcare, education, and scientific research, for example? In this case, the rough nature of the alternatives is clear even though much would need to be learned about the consequences of choices and details of proposals. With other types of issues, it is likely that the nature of the choices themselves would only emerge during the deliberation. No one has any easy answers as to how to revive decaying central cities, and it is likely that reasonable public choices can only be developed during the course of extensive deliberation. If actions are to be taken, however, choices must be made, and in the development and application of a system for electronic democracy, citizens should understand that one of the major purposes of the dialogue is to make such choices.

Action: Why should citizens enter into the hard work of education, discussion, deliberation, and choice? They must understand that when they go through that hard work their choices and judgments will be used. Many people agree that the

responsible choices and judgments of citizens are important, but debate how they should be used. Some believe that it will be enough if citizens understand that their choices are listened to by the elected representatives and taken into full account in legislative and executive action. Others believe that it is vital that the final choices of a well conducted national deliberation have the essential force of law. This is, of course, what the initiative process was supposed to accomplish. Without introducing the idea of a national initiative, it might be sufficient to know that clear national choices resulting after a period of substantial deliberation would, by their very nature, have a compelling effect on legislators and national executives. It is hard to see how a legislator could be expected to be reelected if he failed to take into account the clear will of his constituency. As there is relatively little experience in many of these areas, however, it may be necessary to experiment with several models of electronic democracy.

The authors of the Federalist Papers, when they argued the case for the American experiment, were well aware of two great questions about politics and human nature. One question was whether there could be a viable democratic republic in an extended geographical area with a heterogeneous population. The other was whether human beings are capable of peacefully and deliberately defining and shaping their own futures, or whether the future will inevitably be determined by power and accident. The growth of population and the advance of science and technology sharpen our appreciation of the importance of these two questions. The geographical size of the United States is far beyond that imagined by any of the founding fathers. The population growth has far exceeded what anyone expected a hundred years ago. At the same time, science and technology have greatly increased the power available to rule populations by force. Science and technology can also be applied to allow the American experiment to become more effective, however, to engage citizens in responsible discussion and deliberation about their future; to enable the nation to make choices and shape its destiny more effectively; to give elected representatives the confidence that they can do their work based on an educated citizenry working with, rather than in opposition to, government. Electronic information technology will be used for political purposes. Whether it is used for demogoguery or democracy, the choice is ours.

I am indebted to many people for the thought and work that helped form this essay. I would particularly like to thank: Jeffrey Abramson, Paul Aicher, Gary Arlen, Christopher Arterton, Benjamin Barber, Amitai Etzioni, Charles Firestone, James Fishkin, Siobhan Nicolau, Norman Ornstein, Gary Orren, Erik Sandburg-Diment, William Schneider, Deborah Wadsworth, and Daniel Yankelovich.—Lloyd N. Morrisett